

ROMANS 12, VERSES 1-8, August, 2017, Do not be conformed

This morning, I intend, in a somewhat light-hearted way, to focus on Paul's words in the 12th chapter of Romans, particularly on these profound words: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." Or as the J.B. Phillip's translation for this verse reads, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold, but let God remake you from within." Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed instead. These seem like wise and inspired words, but whatever might that look like? To be transformed? Given that we will shortly be doing a blessing of the animals, let me share a little story with you about the transformation of a beloved cat I once had, by the name of Spooky. My apologies if you've heard this before.

Spooky, a black cat, was given her name by the director of the Lake County Humane Society. On an early frosty Halloween morning some year ago now, some individual in Lake County left their cat huddled in a carrier outside the Lake County Humane Society in the cold. They cared enough to put a blanket in the carrier with the cat, but they didn't care enough to drop the cat off during regular hours and give information that would help with the care and placement of the cat. Fortunately, the director of the Humane Society drove past the building at 6:30 that morning and saw the cat, so it didn't freeze before it was found. The cat was all black with bright yellow eyes, and as she was left on Halloween, the director named her Spooky. Spooky was terrified and traumatized by her abandonment. This new noisy and crowded setting where barking dogs and numerous other cats surrounded her was just too much. She basically shut down, cowering all day and night in a blanket in her cage week after week. Our family at

that time was on the list of those who could take in an animal as a temporary foster family. We were contacted and asked if we could foster Spooky. The director felt Spooky desperately needed a quieter environment with some doses of TLC to help her regain some kind of normality that might allow her to be adopted. I had a few qualms—I wasn't sure if a household which at that time already contained a golden retriever, another fat and furry cat, a rabbit, a chinchilla, and two kids could be called quiet; but we decided to go ahead with the fostering effort.

We went to get her, and sure enough, Spooky was small, all black, and terrified. We left her in her travel kennel with its door open in a cozy little home office we had on the 2nd floor of our parsonage then. We had set this up to be her temporary dwelling with litter box, food and water, a nice little bed, and so forth. Shutting the door carefully, we left her in peace and quiet for a few hours to make her way out of her kennel. After those few hours my kids went to check on her and reported back to me an uncanny occurrence: Spooky the cat was nowhere to be found. Searching with them, I found they were absolutely correct. The cat was not in her kennel, not in her bed, not in a corner, not hiding behind a box. In a small room with no open windows or doors, she had completely disappeared. Sorry to say this, but it was downright spooky. Well, we finally found her, still in the room, stuffed inside the hollow bottom of our old, wooden desk. She apparently had crammed herself into this tiny narrow vertical opening and was hanging within, terrified, like a bat. We couldn't reach her, but we tried uttering soothing words in gentle voices, while I wondered why the heck we were doing this. But by nightfall of that same day, she had left the desk to huddle in a corner, where we could reach her and pet her gently. By the next day, she had found a more suitable bed deep

inside a cat condo we placed there. She ate her food and purred softly when we reached in to pet her. By the time several days had passed, she would come out and greet us when we entered her little room, roll ecstatically around on the floor and purr wildly. She even began to cautiously peer outside the door of the little home office, showing some curiosity about life in the bigger world. In time, because of course we ended up adopting her, Spooky became an affectionate, happy, and devoted cat, altogether different than the cat we first fostered. It was one of the most remarkable and dramatic transformations I have ever seen in any animal --or person, for that matter. She was transformed and her mind renewed; St. Paul would have been pleased!

Returning to St. Paul, and his concern for both the transformation of our lives and the renewal of our minds, we must first recognize that God cares about our minds, our thinking. That our thinking is renewed, matters to God. If we are to be good stewards of our selves, in order to offer our whole selves to God, as Paul urges us here, that includes our minds. And just as it is hard work to steward our physical selves well, so it is hard work to steward our minds, our thinking selves, well. Thinking is hard work, especially if we do it intentionally, critically, and with discernment. It's much easier to just think what everyone else thinks, to conform to this world. With the prevalence of everyone else's opinion, from the talking heads on television to the newsfeed on our Facebook pages, many have basically let their minds out to pasture. It's always tempting to let someone else do our thinking for us. I've probably mentioned before that the Episcopal Church once ran an ad that said, "Christ died to take away our sins, not our minds." How true that is. Offering ourselves to God, as St. Paul tells us to do, does not let us off the hook when it comes to *thinking*---thinking about God, about faith, about the world, about

our place in the world. Conformity is so easy, thinking is so hard. Don't be squeezed into letting others do your thinking *for* you, Paul warns us. God intends to remake you from within and wants your transformed mind, as well as your body, heart and soul. And this renewal will allow us to *discern* God's will, to discern God at work in the world and in us. But, to return to our initial question--how *can* our minds be transformed and renewed? How might that look?

As humans, I believe there could be a lesson in the transformation of that small, black cat I mentioned. What transformed Spooky? Why did Spooky transform rather than give up, retreat further, and die? I have to believe that it has something to do with our persistence and patience in loving her, encouraging her, challenging her to take a few more steps at a time, and offering her options and opportunities to grow. Isn't that one of the ways that people are also transformed? When others offer persistent, patient love, along with some challenges or opportunities? And just as we are able to do that for other people or animals, God does that for us. God looks to transform us, to renew us, to help us grow beyond where we may get stuck or complacent or paralyzed. God wants more for us than mere conformity to this world---a world that can be harsh, unforgiving, and judgmental. A world that holds us up to a standard of success or behavior that may not be in accordance with our values as people of faith. Jesus ran into problems with the conventional wisdom of his day all of the time; it's no surprise if we, his followers, do likewise.

We see how God transforms human minds and thinking in many of the encounters Jesus had with his disciples and those around him. Last week we had the lesson of Jesus encountering a Canaanite woman who begged him to heal her daughter. This occurred

because Jesus led his disciples out of the safety zone of Jewish Palestine into the pagan regions of Tyre and Sidon. He stretched his disciple's comfort zone simply by walking with them out of their safe place, much as we lured Spooky out of the desk. When the woman called on Jesus to help, his disciples urged Jesus to send her away; she wasn't Jewish, she was a female, she was making a scene, and in accordance with the conventional beliefs of their day, she did not merit God's mercy. But, Jesus and the woman engage in a spirited debate, which ends with Jesus saying, "Woman, great is your faith" and the healing of her daughter. Think of all the transformations that occurred in this instance; not only did the woman and her daughter experience transformation, but the disciples were also transformed. Jesus brought his disciples into contact with new people, places, and understanding. He enlarged their view of God's kingdom, which is welcoming to all seekers. He changed their thinking and renewed their minds.

This renewal of thinking happens all the time to those who hang with Jesus. He constantly challenged conventional wisdom and stretched the minds of those around him. I would suggest that in many ways, large and small, God continues to do the same for us. God is nothing if not persistent, patient, loving, and challenging of us---not giving up on us, not letting us sink into the comfort of conformity or complacency, but urging us to take some new steps, learn some new things, be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

How many times have you felt led to try something new? It doesn't have to be big! But, a new activity, project, book, or cause grabs hold of you, and you move beyond your comfort zone to try something new and renewing? I'm turning into a pickleball player! I'd never played it before in my life, but when I saw the poster in the Knife River post office, it sounded like fun, I felt a little internal nudge and I thought—why not? It's

turned out to be a wonderful activity, renewing of both mind and body, as well as being a time with a great group of women doing something active together. Similarly, I became a mentor with the mentor Duluth program because I saw an article about it in the newspaper and seemed to feel one of those divine nudges...give this a try, God seemed to say. It's had some ups and downs, but has definitely has a transforming effect not only on the young girl I'm mentoring but on me—I've learned so much about Native American culture and the socioeconomic impact of poverty. My thinking has been renewed and my life transformed.

It would seem that God delights in challenging us, renewing us, transforming us. You experience this in your life, too. The leadings...the nudges...those recurrent themes god sometimes seems to place into your lives. Sometimes it's almost humorous how God pursues a chain of learning with us. One colleague told the story of a good friend of hers who was an unapologetic racist. Then her friend's daughter adopted an African American baby. That friend and her new grandchild became inseparable. Nevertheless, her friend was very opposed to having a Habitat for Humanity home built in her neighborhood, because it would house those kinds of people, a black family....only to discover that they really were rather fine folks. God has a way of sending experiences to us--through a new grandchild, a new neighbor, right up close and personal—that challenge us, that teach us, that renew and transform us. And God will persistently seek ways to bring about this renewal and transformation within us.

In a perfect world, we would have been worshiping outdoors this morning, where the surrounding of this beautiful part of the world would also demonstrate God's gift for transformation and renewal. Year after year, the cycles of the seasons bless us and the

world is renewed. And the animals we bless this morning are another part of that renewal and transformation, as we delight in them, are exasperated by them, learn lessons from them, and grow in our wise and caring tending of them. God works to transform us through the beauties of nature, the eccentricities and delights of pets, children, and other people, through prayer and Scripture reading and worship, through new experiences, learnings and challenges. In all these ways and more, God looks to see us transformed and renewed, as we offer our whole selves to God in our worship and service. Amen.